

## **Parties promise plenty for transit users; New subways, tax breaks among big-ticket pledges as commute times soar**

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### **Body**

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Multi-billion dollar investments in new rail lines, tax incentives to ride the bus, and even free public transit trips.

Those are among the raft of promises the four major federal parties are making ahead of Monday's federal election to improve transit.

Marco D'Angelo, CEO of the Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA), said the degree to which federal leaders are focusing on transportation issues is new, and encouraging for his organization, which represents transit agencies and related businesses across the country.

"In this election campaign each of the parties in their own way have made transit a priority issue ... that wasn't always the case in the past," he said.

"It seems to be there's a consensus across the spectrum that improving Canadians' mobility is a top-of-mind issue."

D'Angelo speculated the increased emphasis is probably a result of worsening commute times in cities across Canada. According to the 2016 census, it takes 1.5 million Canadians more than an hour to get to work, 57 per cent of them in cars.

"Canadians by and large are looking for options away from the single-occupancy vehicle," D'Angelo said.

All four parties have pledged to spend heavily on big-ticket transportation projects, following the Liberal government's commitment to invest \$28.7 billion in public transit over a 12-year period starting in 2016.

That federal funding is expected to help pay for projects like Toronto's Ontario Line and Scarborough subway extension, as well as Montreal's Réseau express métropolitain light rail network.

"These investments are already delivering meaningful results for Canadians: strong economic growth, record low unemployment levels and a swift transition towards a cleaner environment," said Liberal spokesperson Joe Pickerill.

The Conservatives, NDP and Greens have all promised to preserve any projects committed to under the Liberal program.

In response to calls from municipalities struggling to make long-term plans to expand their networks, the NDP, Liberals and Green party have promised to make federal transit funding permanent after the current program expires in 2028.

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To ensure the fund keeps pace with rising construction costs, the Liberals would increase the spending to \$3 billion a year after that date. The Green party would spend \$3.4 billion annually.

According to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, which represents 2,000 cities and rural communities, a permanent stream of funding is essential because "building modern transit takes decades of continuous planning and delivery," and local planners are already running up against the current program's expiry date.

Andrew Scheer's Conservative party hasn't pledged to make the transit fund permanent. Instead, the party would extend the spending window by three years, which the Conservatives say is necessary because under Justin Trudeau's Liberals the money required for major projects isn't being spent fast enough and risks expiring. Scheer has promised prolonging the window won't delay projects.

For regular commuters, the Conservative party's standout policy is its promise to restore the 15 per cent tax credit for public transit passes that Trudeau scrapped in 2017.

The Conservatives say their revived Green Public Transit Tax Credit would save a family of four who regularly use Vancouver's TransLink system \$800 a year. The party predicts the program, which by 2024-25 would cost the federal government \$243 million annually, would increase transit usage and help reduce congestion.

"We are the only party committed to implementing a Green Public Transit Tax Credit to make the cost of taking transit more affordable," said CPC spokesperson Simon Jefferies.

Transit agencies like the TTC opposed the Liberals cancelling the tax credit, arguing agency figures showed it encouraged people to buy transit passes. However, an analysis by the Parliamentary Budget Officer determined that nationwide the tax break didn't "materially increase public transit ridership."

Jagmeet Singh's NDP has made a bold-sounding promise to "help build a path toward" free public transit for provinces and cities that want it. Details of how the plan would work are scarce in the party's policy documents, but they cite the Quebec communities of Candiac and Ste. Julie that already offer free rides.

The party says funding for free transit would come out of the \$1.45 billion additional funding per year a New Democrat government would spend on "clean transit and transportation."

"Our plan will help make commutes easier, cleaner and more affordable," said NDP spokesperson Mélanie Richer.

All parties but the Conservatives have put forward significant measures to increase the use of electric vehicles, including financial incentives for citizens to purchase emissions-free private cars.

Carolyn Kim, director of transportation and urban solutions at the Pembina Institute, a non-partisan environmental advocacy group, said the focus on greener mobility is important because the transportation sector accounts for a quarter of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions, and reducing pollution from the sector is crucial to the country's efforts to tackle climate change.

"It's a big challenge, and also the biggest opportunity for government to take serious climate action," Kim said.

Under an NDP government, the party promises federal transit funding would prioritize low-carbon projects like zero-emissions buses and electric trains, with the goal of electrifying transit systems by 2030.

According to CUTA, because some buses on the road today have expected shelf-lives of 15 years or more, the NDP plan could require retiring vehicles early.

Notably, Elizabeth May's climate-conscious Greens have set a later target of 2040 to achieve emissions-free fleets. To help reach that goal, the party would ban the sale of combustion engine passenger vehicles by 2030.

"Greens have the most extensive plan to decarbon transportation," said party spokesperson John Bennett, citing their proposed \$100-million annual fund for walking and cycling infrastructure in addition to electric vehicle efforts.

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The Liberals pledge that beginning in 2023 all new federal investments in transit must be used for zero-emission buses and rail systems. Trudeau's party would also create a fund to help school boards and cities buy 5,000 zero-emission school and transit buses. By 2021-2022 the party expects to spend \$180 million a year on electrifying transit and transportation.

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